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Gore: Reagan and Bush at Fault — Not Us!

Commentators Hit Clinton Administration on Nuclear Technology Theft and Suspicious China Ties

On March 6, 1999, the *New York Times* broke the story on the Clinton Administration's months of inaction after learning that the People's Republic of China had stolen U.S. nuclear secrets enabling the development of compact and more lethal nuclear weapons. This revelation came just as the Senate prepared to debate S. 257, the National Missile Defense Act, which would establish as U.S. national policy the deployment of a missile defense system capable of defending the territory of the United States from limited ballistic missile attack as soon as technologically feasible. The threat of missile attack, from China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) at least, may now be much more serious due to the stolen nuclear technology. [For details of the technology theft and the national security implications, see RPC's "China's Theft of U.S. Nuclear Secrets," 3/12/99.]

Backed into a corner, the Clinton Administration responded according to form: blame Presidents Reagan and Bush. (This is of course the same Clinton Administration that never hesitates to steal credit for accomplishments of the GOP Congress, from welfare reform to the balanced budget and the booming economy.) While much of the technology theft did indeed occur during the pre-Clinton era, it reportedly was only discovered in 1995 — on Clinton's watch. In any case, the blame game was not washing with the nation's editorial-writers and columnists. For example:

"It is true that the original theft of the W-88 technology came in the mid-1980s, and that Mr. Clinton's predecessors bear the blame for lax security precautions at the time. But George Bush and Ronald Reagan did not sit on warnings about a spy in their midst. Nor were they playing host to PLA coffee klatches. Nor would they have waited until the *New York Times* put something on the front page to fire a suspected spy for a foreign interest." ["China Buys . . .," *Wall Street Journal*, editorial, 3/11/99"]

Indeed, if the "Blame Reagan/Bush" dodge has fallen flat, the commentators *have* noticed that the Clinton Administration's discovery of the theft took place in the thick of the 1996 campaign fundraising season, in which money with ties to Beijing — some of it later found to be illegal — figured prominently in filling the Clinton-Gore war chest. The commentators have not been shy about raising some serious questions about the seeming coincidence. A few examples follow:

“China Buys . . . ,” *Wall Street Journal*, editorial, 3/11/99”

“What should disturb all Americans is the reluctance of the White House officials to do anything even after an Energy Department intelligence official alerted them that there was a spy in their midst — a warning both the FBI and CIA directors personally passed on to then Department of Energy chief Federico Pena. [. . .]

“The Clinton Administration’s inaction, after all, did not occur in a vacuum. It came in the thick of a 1996 re-election effort we now know included campaign contributions from those with ties to the Chinese government, its military and even its intelligence organizations.

“In other words, at the same time the FBI and CIA were investigating the source of the Los Alamos leak, Vice President Al Gore was passing the hat among inexplicably wealthy Buddhist nuns, Mr. Clinton was serving coffee at the White House to PLA arms dealer Wang Jun and the Administration responded favorably to a request from a man who would be the Democratic Party’s largest donor in 1996 — Loral Chairman Bernard L. Schwartz — to transfer authority over licensing of satellite technology from the State to Commerce Department. Two years later Loral would be granted a Presidential waiver to export its technology to China, even though it was under criminal investigation by the Justice Department for previous technology transfers.

“No wonder the Administration line has been to blame the Reagan and Bush administrations, the same reason it gave for signing the technology waivers in the first place. . . . [But m]ore to the point here, neither of Mr. Clinton’s predecessors involved their foreign policy people in campaign politics the way this Administration has. What makes Sandy Berger’s lack of action on the espionage front so scandalous is that as deputy National Security Adviser in 1996 he sat in on the weekly White House meetings about the re-election campaign. And he wasn’t alone. The President himself chaired a September 13, 1995, meeting after which Johnny Huang — Lippo’s man at the Commerce Department — was transferred to the Democratic National Committee.

“The result was that a man suspected of having compromised national security continued at his post, and foreign scientists were allowed to visit lab facilities without background checks. [. . .]

“The Chinese, after all, are not stupid: they got the nuclear plans they were after. Presumably a country that is able to pull off an espionage coup of this magnitude is not likely to try to channel hundreds of thousands of dollars into a U.S. Presidential campaign without some quid pro quo in mind. The real scandal may not be what the Chinese were able to steal, but what they were able to buy.”

“The Great Stonewall,” *New York Post*, editorial, 3/10/99

“Why did the Clinton administration wait until a series of front-page newspaper reports on Chinese nuclear espionage appeared before firing the chief suspect in the case?

“That’s just one of the questions Congress should ask in the upcoming Senate Intelligence Committee hearings. Another is whether the White House deliberately soft-pedaled — for political reasons — the extent of Beijing’s efforts to steal U.S. nuclear technology. [. . .]

“[T]here’s evidence the Clinton administration tried to sweep the situation under the rug — at a time when the White House faced a barrage of accusations concerning Beijing’s alleged manipulation of the 1996 Clinton/Gore re-election campaign. [. . .]

"Meanwhile, the White House — led by Vice President Al Gore — is stressing the fact that the actual spying took place during the Reagan/Bush administrations.

"That's true enough — but it doesn't excuse the ongoing efforts by this administration to keep this story hush-hush. If, as Congress charges, there's an ongoing national security problem, it's time to bring this situation in from the cold."

"Unkept Secrets," (Cleveland, OH) *Plain Dealer*, editorial, 3/10/99

"The Clinton administration closed the barn door behind Wen Ho Lee on Monday.

"A computer scientist with top security clearance at the nuclear weapons research lab at Los Alamos, N.M., Lee is suspected of passing highly classified information to Beijing in the late '80s, information that saved China some 15 years of research. [. . .]

"Lee was fired — 17 months after [FBI Director Louis] Freeh's advice, several months after Rep. Christopher Cox's committee raised a bipartisan alarm about Chinese espionage and DOE's suppression of information about it, several weeks after Lee flunked a polygraph test, and two days after a *New York Times* report.

"Why the delay? It's hard not to note what else was happening as the investigations and security improvements limped along. Congress was investigating illegal contributions to the Clinton-Gore campaign passed through conduits with direct connections to Beijing, the Clinton Administration, as part of its policy of 'engagement' with China, was selling an old naval base on the California coast to a Chinese firm and making high-tech exports to China easier than ever — an easing of regulations that illegal exports of missile technology just forced it to reverse.

"The full report from the Cox committee is due soon, the fuller and sooner the better. Congressional intelligence committees will investigate as well. The sooner they do, the better, too."

"Lies About China," op-ed by Michael Kelly, *Washington Post*, 3/11/99

"President Clinton's China policy, a mess of corruption and carelessness and naivete, is collapsing under the weight of its own fraudulence, exposing the nation Clinton calls America's 'strategic partner' as a threat to America's security and a thief of America's nuclear secrets, and exposing also the president and senior administration officials for their efforts to minimize and hide this unwelcome fact.

"For the past six years, the White House has lied about China. It pretended, against all evidence, that the People's Republic was sincere in its promises to curb its persecution of democrats, Catholic priests, Tibetan monks, pregnant women and other enemies of the people. It pretended that China was sincere also in its promises to curb its spread of weapons of mass destruction. It pretended not to understand that China regarded the United States as enemy number one in its campaign to achieve regional dominance, particularly over Taiwan. [. . .]

"Meanwhile, the *New York Times*, elaborating on earlier stories in the *Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post*, gave front-page play to a bombshell.

"In April 1996, Energy Department officials informed Samuel Berger, then Clinton's deputy national security adviser, that Notra Trulock, the department's chief of intelligence, had uncovered evidence that showed China had learned how to miniaturize nuclear bombs, allowing for smaller, more lethal missile warheads. And it appeared that the Chinese had gained that knowledge through

the efforts of a spy at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Berger was told the spy might be still in place. [. . .]

"But Trulock's warning came at an awkward time. The administration was on the verge of the 1997 'strategic partnership' summit with Beijing. It was also facing congressional investigations into charges that the People's Republic had illegally funneled money into the 1996 Clinton-Gore campaign. Very awkward, really. [. . .]

"[S]till the White House seeks to hide what truth it can. A declassified version of the Cox committee's 800-page bipartisan report is scheduled to be released late this month — happily enough, just days before a Washington visit by China's prime minister. The White House is waging a desperate rear-guard campaign to force the Republicans to redact evidence about the administration's suspiciously deleterious approach to the Los Alamos spy case and also evidence suggesting linkage between Clinton's China policy reversal and campaign contributions from parties desiring that reversal.

"But these tactics will probably fail. An angered Republican leadership is considering taking the matter to the full House, where an unexpurgated report could be voted out over Democratic objections. Good. Let a thousand flowers bloom."

"The Mother of All Scandals," *Washington Times*, editorial, 3/11/99

"As might have been expected, in response to the burgeoning Chinese espionage scandal, the Clinton administration wasted little time unveiling its 'Blame Ronald Reagan First' strategy. Vice President Al Gore will be the man to deal with any electoral repercussions, and so the White House dispatched him to CNN on Tuesday to spread whatever disinformation he could. In no mood to accept responsibility, Mr. Gore put on a very disingenuous show. Coming from the man who coined the phrase 'no controlling legal authority' to absolve himself of any guilt for shaking down Buddhist monks and nuns for campaign contributions in 1996, Mr. Gore's performance met the low standards he long ago perfected.

"Mr. Gore was asked by CNN about charges that the Clinton-Gore administration had been 'negligent in dealing with an allegation of espionage of nuclear secrets at the Los Alamos nuclear-research facility,' where China stole weapons designs enabling it to develop miniaturized warheads and to leapfrog an entire generation in its nuclear-weapons program. 'That happened during the previous administration. That happened back in the 1980s,' Mr. Gore said. 'And as soon as the investigation identified targets of that investigation, then the law-enforcement community handled that very aggressively,' Mr. Gore deceitfully asserted. 'It resulted in a presidential directive that completely changed the procedures at the weapons labs.'

"The problem is, Mr. Gore's self-serving interpretation in no way conforms with reality. [. . .]

"Contrary to CNN's report, which said the White House was 'only briefed about the possible technology secrets theft in mid-1997,' the White House was, in fact, first briefed in April 1996. At that meeting, Mr. Trulock and several other senior DOE officials informed then-Deputy National Security Adviser Sandy Berger that China appeared to have reproduced and successfully tested the W-88 warhead — America's most advanced nuclear weapon, eight of which are deployed on each Trident D-5 submarine-launched ballistic missile. Mr. Berger, who was promoted to national security adviser in 1997, was also told that the suspected spy continued to work as Los Alamos.

"This initial White House briefing, it's worth repeating, occurred in April 1996. At that very moment, Democratic bagman John Huang was raising millions of dollars from illegal and highly questionable Asian sources. Three months later, Johnny Chung, whom an NSC official had previously labeled 'a hustler,' began funneling \$100,000 from Chinese military intelligence into the Clinton-Gore reelection campaign and the Democratic National Committee. The source of Mr. Chung's 1996 donations was Liu Chao-ying, a Chinese aerospace executive who was also a lieutenant colonel in China's People's Liberation Army and the daughter of China's highest-ranking military commander and in charge of obtaining Western military technology to upgrade China's army and nuclear missile force."

"Remember, They're Communists," *Investor's Business Daily*, editorial, 3/12/99

"What a surprise: Red China seems to have been stealing nuclear missile technology from the U.S. And in another 'shocker,' the Clinton administration dragged its feet on stopping the thefts after it learned of them.

"The *New York Times* reported this weekend that China had been engaged for more than a decade in efforts to steal nuclear weapons secrets from the Los Alamos National Laboratory. And the White House went into its usual damage control — blame somebody else.

"That happened during the previous administration,' carped Vice President Al Gore on CNN this week. 'That happened in the 1980s.'

"True, but this administration's response, upon learning of the theft in 1995 of the design of a miniature nuclear warhead, was hardly comforting. Reported the *Times*: 'The response to the nuclear theft was marked by delays, inaction and skepticism — even though senior intelligence officials regarded it as one of the most damaging spy cases in recent history.' The theft of the warhead design sped up China's development of nuclear weapons by at least a decade. [. . .]

"In addition to the nuclear warhead secrets China has stolen, it has also obtained sensitive missile guidance technology from the U.S. Two U.S. companies — one CEO was a big donor to the Clinton-Gore campaign — got waivers to launch commercial satellites on Chinese rockets. When two of the rockets crashed, the administration's lax security let Red China get documents from the companies that gave them the guidance technology. [. . .]

"[M]aybe the fact that Chinese nationals, including some with direct ties to China's army, were willing to contribute to Clinton's re-election effort had something to do with the White House's China policy."

"White House Shouldn't Get Away with Minimizing Espionage," op-ed by William Safire, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 3/10/99

"Throughout the 1996 Clinton campaign for president, China's agents of influence had the run of the White House as they raised millions for the Clinton campaign. Chinese military intelligence officials were waved in without clearance. U.S. executives contributed megabucks as they lobbied for easier approval of sales of sensitive technology to Beijing.

"In the midst of this — in April of 1996 — a Department of Energy official informed President Clinton's deputy national security adviser, Samuel Berger, one, that China had probably stolen our secrets of making warheads small enough to enable long-range missiles to pack multiple nuclear

punches and, two, that the suspected spy was still at work in the Los Alamos laboratory in New Mexico.

"Berger, who sat in on most of the political meetings with Clinton's Asian fund-raisers, did nothing. The internal security division of the Department of Justice apparently did not ask a court for wiretap authority under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. At Reno Justice, investigating any Chinese penetration is a no-no. [. . .]

"Berger has a unique geopolitical Weltanschauung: Whatever elects Clinton and protects him from criticism is good for our national security. Accordingly, his spin control will be: The initial breach happened in the '80s, so blame Reagan, not us. [. . .]

"Not yet denied, but likely to be unless witnesses were present, is *The Times*' account that Trulock 'was ordered last year by senior officials not to tell Congress about his findings because critics might use them to attack the administration's China policies, officials said.' For spilling the beans, Trulock was demoted.

"Now we're getting to the nub of it. Yanked to a complete turnabout on trade policy with China by the Riady family and other heavy campaign contributors in the satellite and computer businesses, Clinton did not want Congress — empowered by law with oversight of intelligence — to know what the FBI and CIA and DOE suspected about China's spy in Los Alamos.

"Although aware of the dangerous spying, Clinton still insisted that regulation of the transfer of sensitive technology be controlled by his sell-'em-anything commerce department.

"He delivered for China. Will Congress now protect the interests of the United States?"

"China Espionage, Release the Cox Report Now," *Dallas Morning News*, editorial, 3/10/99

"Recent news reports about Chinese nuclear espionage at the Los Alamos national laboratory in New Mexico leave little doubt that U.S. national security has been seriously breached. 'This was far more damaging to the national security than Aldrich Ames,' says Paul Redmond, the former head of CIA counterintelligence who ended Mr. Ames' betrayal. [. . .]

"Why would a national security guru choose to hear no evil, see no evil and speak no evil? One possibility is that Mr. Berger subsumed the national security of the United States to the political fortunes of President Clinton in the 1996 election. It would certainly be consistent with a campaign that, as columnist William Safire puts it, gave 'China's agents of influence the run of the White House as they raised millions for the Clinton campaign.'

"True, security occasionally went on holiday during the Reagan and Bush years, too. But the Clinton White House seems to have gone one better and lapsed into a Rip Van Winkle-like sleep."

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